

April 3, 1971

**Honorable Ronald Reagan  
Governor of the State of California  
Sacramento, California**

**Dear Governor:**

**As I promised you, enclosed is an additional analysis of Lam Son 719 which is much less sensitive than the paper I gave you in San Clemente on Friday.**

**You may feel free to share the contents of this document with your staff and to draw upon it publicly but in a nonattributable way.**

**Warm regards,**

/s/

**Henry A. Kissinger**

**Enclosure**

ARMY review completed.

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### The Situation

1. The South Vietnamese entered Southern Laos in early February in order to disrupt the operation of the Ho Chi Minh trail and the southward flow of enemy supplies bound for Cambodia and South Vietnam. Hanoi's response to this operation is an important factor in assessing the outcome. If, for example, the North Vietnamese had chosen to evade South Vietnamese forces, then there would have been relatively little fighting and the operation would have been assessed more in terms of supplies destroyed or bottled up. But for several good reasons, such as the importance of the area, the short supply lines to North Vietnam and the availability of reserve forces in southern North Vietnam -- the North Vietnamese as anticipated undertook a major counter attack. They reinforced the area strongly with some of their best divisions, not only to defend the trail system but in an attempt to inflict a major defeat on the South Vietnamese as well. As a result, the most intensive fighting since 1968 developed.

### Immediately Measurable Results

2. In terms of immediately measurable results, the weight of evidence is that South Vietnamese forces acquitted themselves very well in the six weeks of fighting which followed the initial incursion into Laos. Many of the ARVN units involved fought without respite for 40 days and, in the judgment of our field commanders, the ARVN forces fought extremely well. Because of the intensity of the fighting, these units did take some heavy

enemy losses were more than 13,000 killed and many more were

wounded. In terms of combat effectiveness, we estimate that the

equivalent of 13 enemy maneuver battalions were rendered ineffective

in the course of the fighting whereas only 4 out of the 22 ARVN battalions

were put out of combat. Some reports of enemy losses in Vietnam in

the past may have been exaggerated, but this time the estimate may be low.

The enemy acted more aggressively than he had in several years with

the result that he exposed himself to concentrated allied firepower and

air attack. Thus, we believe the ratio of enemy to friendly losses was

at least 5 to 1, a very high price for Hanoi to pay.

#### Impact on the North Vietnamese Logistics System

3. It is too early to be precise about the impact of Lam Son 719 on the enemy's logistical system, although some perspective can be provided.

The North Vietnamese had to move more supplies South to Cambodia and South Vietnam this year than last in order to make up for the loss of three major means of supply: the Port of Sihanoukville; purchases in Cambodia; and food obtained from areas which had previously been under Viet Cong control in South Vietnam but which are now under the authority of the government. Moreover, he comments he had suffered great losses in the Cambodian sanctuaries last year.

Thus, the Ho Chi Minh Trail has become an even more vital element

reasonably certain that the enemy supply movement was well behind last year's pace even before the Lam Son operation began.

The Lam Son operation clearly compounded Hanoi's problem. It disrupted the Ho Chi Minh trail complex, physically blocking various branches of the trail. South Vietnamese forces found or destroyed, or called in U.S. air power to destroy, some 4900 individual weapons, 1900 crew served weapons and thousands of tons of ammunition and other supplies. This was in addition to the vast quantity of supplies, ammunition and equipment which was consumed by the North Vietnamese in Laos instead of continuing down the trail to be used in South Vietnam or Cambodia. Moreover, when the North Vietnamese were obliged to engage ARVN forces in a fixed battle position, their units massed and became targets for concentrated Vietnamese firepower and U.S. air power which destroyed over 100 tanks and many artillery pieces, some 300 enemy trucks were destroyed directly in the operation and 4300 more were destroyed by air interdiction while the operations were in progress. Finally, because North Vietnamese logistics units were engaged in the fighting and were badly damaged, their resiliency in restoring the flow of supplies southward has been degraded. An estimated 3500 enemy rear service personnel vital to the operation of the trail logistics system were killed.

All these considerations must be viewed against the fact that the Ho Chi Minh trail complex is useful as a logistics system only during the dry season, which began later this year than usual. Therefore, when the rains come in the next four or five weeks, the Communists will have little time in which to attempt to make up all the weeks that have been lost to them in the Lam Son operation.

#### Forestalling Anticipated Enemy Offensive Activity in South Vietnam

4. A significant measure of Lam Son's achievements will be the degree it succeeds in forestalling enemy offensive activity. Viewed in conjunction with ARVN operations conducted simultaneously in Cambodia, these two efforts have precluded major enemy offensive operations in South Vietnam during the current dry season. If Lam Son had not been undertaken, the North Vietnamese would have had the real option of launching major attacks against ARVN and U.S. forces located in the northern provinces of South Vietnam. Looking to the future, we believe that the short-fall in their supply efforts will prevent them from mounting major offensives in South Vietnam in this dry season and will delay any offensives they might have planned over the next dry season because it will take them that much longer to rebuild their stocks.

Hanoi will, of course, want to mask the extent to which its capabilities have been impaired and will therefore endeavor to act as

if it is playing from strength. To project this image, the Communists may be willing to spend additional manpower capital in the days immediately ahead by trying to mount a sharp flurry of attacks in the northern part of South Vietnam, and elsewhere if they can get such attacks off the ground. Such attacks may be specifically directed against U.S. units in an endeavor to increase American casualties, whatever the cost to Hanoi. Nonetheless, the Communists probably have lost the ability to mount sustained major offensives and the overall record of Communist activity over the next few months can be expected to support this contention.

The combined military operations also have had the effect of engaging the enemy and keeping his forces distant from the population of South Vietnam. To illustrate this graphically, it should be pointed out that the Toan Thang operation North of Route 7 inside Cambodia is being fought against the First, Fifth, Seventh and Ninth North Vietnamese and Viet Cong Divisions, the same units which, at this time of the year in 1968, were operating inside the city limits of Saigon and the surrounding metropolitan area. As for the enemy units engaged in Lam Son -- the North Vietnamese 304th, 308th, 320th and 324-B Divisions -- in February and March of 1968, fought for two weeks in the city of Hue, entered the defenses of Danang, and generally harassed the population in the coastal regions. All of these

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enemy units were engaged this year away from population centers and,  
in fact, outside of South Vietnam itself.

#### Lam Son's Bearing on Vietnamization

5. Lam Son has underlined the progress which has been made in Vietnamization. Three years ago, ARVN units were engaged against enemy units in and close to South Vietnam's own population centers. Now ARVN units have shown themselves able to deal with the enemy threat in the coastal Hamlet areas, the Central Highlands, and the mountainous sanctuary areas without the support of U.S. ground combat forces or the ability to mount sustained offensive operations and the overall support of U.S. advisors while keeping their own territory pacified as well. They have demonstrated the ability to mount a complex multi-division operation in conditions of difficult and unfamiliar terrain, adverse weather, and against a well-prepared enemy. Moreover, this is being achieved with a U.S. presence which has diminished by some 260,000 men since 1969.

To illustrate this point further, it should be recognized that February and March are the months of the year in which the Communists traditionally mount the most extensive military operations in all regions of South Vietnam. This year they were given an additional incentive to do this because of the fact that such actions would harass the rear areas of ARVN operations in Laos and Cambodia and would distract attention from those two actions. Despite exhortations to their cadre to underfake

such action within South Vietnam, they have been unable to date to mount anything which can even be considered a major successful high point. In fact, the situation within South Vietnam has been extraordinarily calm during the entire month of February and March with the exception of an action being taken by ARVN forces against Communist strongholds in the U Minh forest of Military Region IV.

The ability of the South Vietnamese forces to sustain security after the departure of United States forces will, in the long run, be measured by the balance of strength which exists between North and South Vietnamese forces. Our assessment is that the balance in the Indochina peninsula has swung in favor of the South Vietnamese. As Ambassador Bunker has reported, the operation has created confidence among the South Vietnamese in the ability of ARVN and pride in its accomplishments. There has been satisfaction in the fact that the fighting has been taken outside the borders of South Vietnam and that ARVN has been able to inflict far heavier casualties on the enemy.

We conclude, therefore, that the foundation for Vietnamization in South Vietnam is sound and that the process has been enhanced by the disruptions Lam Son has caused the enemy and by the increased confidence it has given the South Vietnamese in meeting their own defense needs.



The current psychological atmosphere is in some ways reminiscent of the 1968 Tet offensive. Hanoi extracted maximum political advantage in the short run; it was only as time passed that the real physical results began to tell. This time, we must benefit from that lesson and not let ourselves be misled by surface appearances or by exaggerated stories.

The operation has achieved its primary objective of carrying the fight to the enemy's sanctuaries and disrupting his principal lines of communications and should buy the South Vietnamese additional time in which to strengthen their armed forces while permitting continued withdrawal of U.S. combat forces.

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